DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 386 757 CS 215 070

AUTHOR Thurston, Kay
TITLE The Tribal College: A Model for Western Institutions.
PUB DATE 25 Mar 95
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Context; *Culturally Relevant Education; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; *Navajo (Nation); *Student Needs; Teaching Methods; *Tribally Controlled Education; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Developmental Writing Program; Historical Background; *Native Americans; *Navajo Community College AZ

ABSTRACT

Mainstream educational institutions could improve their success rate with Native American students by emulating strategies used in tribal colleges. It is a well-documented fact that Western institutions are extremely unsuccessful in retaining Native American students. Research focusing specifically on composition courses at the University of New Mexico found that Native Americans are two-and-a-half times more likely to drop or fail those courses than their Anglo counterparts. One of the main factors in the high dropout rate is financial difficulty; another factor is the Native American student's need for family contact and support. Navajo educators at Navajo Community College (NCC) in Arizona, have been sensitive to student needs--developmental writing class size has been kept to 15 students, and 3 separate developmental writing classes have been offered. The college also familiarizes Western instructors with the students' cultural background and the historical context in which teaching takes place. Particularly emphasized are the tribal stories--or at least the first of 12 levels of understanding the stories. In earlier times, White educators tried to eradicate Navajo culture and negate Navajo ways of knowing. The traditional Navajo cultural model, when followed, produces balance and harmony for all of creation. Many writing instructors at NCC (1) use reading and writing topics relevant to students' lives; (2) do less lecturing and more small group work; (3) experiment with portfolios which include community projects; and (4) look for ways to acknowledge different rhetorical styles. (NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 386 757

Kay Thurston
Humanities Division
Navajo Community College
Tsaile, AZ 86556
520-724-3345

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
K. Thurston
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CCCC Conference Presentation
Washington, D.C. 3/25/95

The Tribal College: A Model for Western Institutions

The main point I hope to make in this presentation is that mainstream institutions could improve their success rate with Native American students by emulating strategies used in tribal colleges. I'll be talking specifically about Navajo Community College in Tsaile, Arizona, because that's where I teach, but I've seen evidence that other tribal colleges are implementing or have implemented similar strategies.

First, I'd like to frame the situation in numbers: right now, sixty percent of all Native Americans enrolled in higher education attend one of the twenty-eight tribal colleges in the United States. I don't have documentation yet on the dropout rate at tribal colleges--when I asked the registrar at NCC, she rolled her eyes and said it was impossible to know, because students there enroll, attend a semester or two, drop out, return for another semester or two a year or two later, leave again, and

CS215070

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

then return at some later date. She thought that family responsibilities and financial hardship were the two main reasons for this pattern. I'm not sure if the people generating statistics on Native American students at mainstream institutions have documented this erratic attendance style--or even if the pattern exists at four-year colleges, but it is a well-documented fact that Western institutions are extremely unsuccessful in retaining Native American students.

Five years ago, for example, the Native American high school student drop out rate was 35.5%--over twice that of Euro-American students, and higher than that of any other U.S. ethnic or racial group. In 1987, Northern Arizona University reported a 90% overall attrition rate. Two years ago, research focusing specifically on composition courses at the University of New Mexico found that Native Americans are two and a half times more likely to drop or fail those courses than their Anglo counterparts.

Researchers have attributed the high dropout rates to poor academic performance and linked that poor performance to substandard schooling, to bilingualism, to intolerance of nonstandard American English, to low self-esteem, and to lack of student motivation. While it seems to me valid to say that all these factors contribute to Native Americans' difficulties in Western educational institutions, the problem I have with these studies is first that they assume that academic failure is the cause of the high drop out rate, and second, they locate the

cause of that failure in the Native American student.

The fact is that many Native American dropouts are not academic failures--their performance is similar to that of students who remain in school. A recent study of Navajo dropouts, for example, shows that 45% were B or better students. It seems clear to me that if we are sincere in our desire to explain Native American students' tendency to abandon Western education, we must shift our focus from Native American students to ourselves: we, as mainstream educators, must account for our high failure rates with Native American students. Another way to say this is to ask: What are we doing wrong? What should we be doing differently?

Some things are fairly obvious. Like all students, Native American students have needs, and if we don't meet those needs, they'll go elsewhere or drop out. Financial problems are especially pressing for most Native American students. Poverty on the Navajo reservation is so widespread it's the norm. There are few jobs, so unemployment is up around 75%. Half the homes are without phones, electricity, and running water. Many of my commuting students live in traditional hogans with dirt floors--they're the ones who can't make it to class after a heavy rain. Driving in a foot of mud is worse than driving in snow.

It seems to me that one of the major factors contributing to the high Native American student dropout rate is financial difficulty, and it's my strong belief that if Republicans make the changes in student loan and grant programs that they're

discussing, we'll lose even more Native American students.

Tribal colleges do all they can to keep tuition and fees low. Tuition at NCC, for example, is $300 per semester. At state institutions like the University of New Mexico, it's $900; at private colleges, it's significantly higher. NCC administrators keep fees as low as possible, too: a parking permit NCC, for example, costs $3, as compared to UNM's $60.

A second and perhaps more pressing need than most Anglo faculty members realize is the Navajo students' need for family contact and support. The closest mainstream institutions are between two and six hours' drive from the Navajo reservation. To attend UNM, ASU, or NAU, a Navajo student must leave his or her family and homeland and immerse him- or herself into an alien culture. I think you have to live on the reservation to really understand just how alien Western culture is in comparison. The Navajo Nation may be located in northwestern Arizona, northeastern New Mexico, and the corner of southeastern Utah, but living there is like living in a foreign country in many significant ways.

And I think you have to understand the culture to know how very important family and kinship ties are. Navajos introduce themselves not by telling what they do for work, but by naming their four clans. When, in developmental writing classes, I ask students to write a paragraph describing their best friend, 80 to 90% write about a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, brother, sister, or cousin. I can't remember this ever happening at the

University of Maine or at the University of New Mexico, the two mainstream institutions at which I have taught writing courses.

Navajo educators and medicine men, recognizing the importance of kinship ties, built their college in the center of Navajoland--7000 feet in the Chuska mountains, where Canyon de Chelly begins. There's a Navajo preference hiring policy to employ as many Navajo administrators, instructors, and staff as possible. They made sure that NCC would not be isolated from everyday life, as it is in traditional Western institutions. There's a guest dorm (usually called the "parents' dorm") for visiting parents. There's a single parents' dorm, a head start program, and there are high chairs in the student cafeteria. Most of the other buildings are as home-like as possible: the ten dorms are round, hogan-like structures, each with a fireplace in the center. There's a hogan for ceremonies adjacent to the administrative offices. (They had a ceremony there shortly after the fall semester began to purify the campus after someone saw lightning strike a tree.) A tepee is set up about twice a semester to hold Native American Church meetings for students.

In the classroom, too, Navajo educators have been sensitive to student needs--they've kept developmental writing class sizes down to fifteen students, although recent funding cuts have threatened this ceiling, at least for this summer. Recognizing the special difficulties many Navajos who are bilingual have with English, NCC offers not one but three developmental writing courses. Many instructors at NCC also modify Western teaching

strategies--largely as a result of the training we receive from Dine Educational Philosophy instructors, one of whom is a practicing medicine man.

What I'd like to do now is talk about what I've learned through NCC's effort to educate its instructors; then, I'll finish by outlining how this information has changed and is changing the way some NCC instructors teach English composition.

A unique feature of Navajo Community College is its attempt to educate its Western instructors so that we'll become familiar with our students' cultural backgrounds and the historical context within which we teach. We learn, for example, that the notion of Europeans "discovering" a new continent and "settling" a vast, uninhabited wilderness is a distortion of history--that the U.S. was built on stolen land and on the racist exploitation of peoples of color; that the U.S. government paid fifty dollars for each scalp (or, sometimes, an ear) of a dead Indian; that Native Americans of almost every tribe were "relocated"--moved, that is, off their homeland and contained within reservations on less desirable land. The Navajos, for example, were ordered to report to Fort Wingate, near Gallup, New Mexico for removal to Bosque Redondo, or be shot on sight. Kit Carson, who was portrayed as an American hero in history textbooks when I was a schoolchild, led the U.S. Army in hunting down resisting Navajos and forcing their surrender with General Carleton's "scorched earth" policy. He ordered the destruction of all shelters,

livestock, and crops, including the peach trees he found cultivated in Canyon de Chelly.

Once the Navajos were rounded up and removed to Bosque Redondo, the Army attempted to turn the responsibility for the Navajos over to the Department of the Interior. The department resisted: no one wanted to foot the bill for feeding and clothing thousands of people placed in a location so barren that self-sufficiency was not possible. When the Navajos first arrived, each man, woman, and child was given a daily allowance of one-half pound of flour or corn meal and one half pound of meat. That soon dwindled to half rations, which provided roughly one thousand calories per day. Individuals consumed their entire weekly ration in the first two days and then chewed hides and begged the soldiers for more food.

Many whites, appalled by the situation, joined Navajo leaders in working to have the people released and returned to their original homeland. Four years later, the Navajo were allowed to return--to a reservation that, because of white settlers and ranchers, had been reduced to only ten percent of the land base the Navajos had lived on prior to their incarceration. In exchange for the loss of land, the U.S. government promised to educate Navajo children. In signing the treaty of 1868, Navajo leaders thought they were agreeing to an education that would combine the best of <u>both</u> the Navajo and Western worlds--one that allowed the Dine to keep their own traditional ways and values.

What they got was something very different.

European-Americans' endeavor to eradicate Native American culture was turned over to an army of (often well-meaning) educators who saw Indians' cultural customs as "stumbling blocks." They wanted to "civilize" Indians and created off-reservation boarding schools for that purpose. The goal of these schools was not to provide a real education, but to assimilate Indians into Western culture--and to train them for menial positions in the Western work place. A 1950s BIA program report from Riverside, CA, for example, describes in glowing terms the successful training of four bus boys. Anglo educators considered that a very positive achievement.

Navajo leaders did not agree.

Navajos were also deeply troubled by the fact that Navajo students in BIA boarding schools were 100 times more likely to commit suicide than white teenagers. Students hated the regimentation--I hear over and over from my own students that boarding school was just like the military. Most of the Navajo students at NCC or at any mainstream institution have either attended BIA boarding schools or have close relatives who did. They tell stories of being paddled or being forced to clean toilets for speaking Navajo instead of English; they tell stories of relatives who ran away, some of whom froze to death trying to walk the 50 or 100 miles home. Today, many traditional Navajos blame the rise in domestic violence and alcoholism on the trauma experienced by Navajo students at BIA boarding schools.

Contributing to the trauma experienced at boarding schools was Western educators' systematic denial of the significance of the Indian world and its values. This hasn't changed much. Western ethnocentrism leads to our almost total ignorance about other cultures and world views. It may not be deliberate, but we unthinkingly promote Western culture and values at the expense of all others--the education we offer is too often geared toward the white, middle-class student, with little or no consideration for anyone else. In the typical mainstream composition classroom, for example, a Native American student will find his or her culture/people completely absent. In the fall of 1993, Navajos enrolled in ENG 102 at UNM faced white instructors who approached their classes as if they were homogenous. None of the essays in either of the two required texts was by or about Native Americans (let alone Navajos), and because individual teaching assistants were not permitted to select their own texts or to supplement those texts with photocopied material, even instructors willing to find and assign such material couldn't have done so. (Note: In response to this situation, the Freshman English director initiated a course designed specifically for Native American students which combines the standard texts with others that include readings by and about Native Americans, and this strategy has been employed by several different universities and colleges in the Southwest. To my knowledge, no one has compared their progress with that of Native Americans enrolled in standard composition sections.)

In response to Western ethnocentrism and the consequent high dropout rate of Native Americans from institutions of higher learning, a mixed blood Menominee (August Breuninger) who firmly believed that Indians should not assimilate, but rather accept the best of both worlds proposed the idea of an "Indian university" a hundred years ago. Most white educators, who insisted on the necessity of total assimilation, ardently opposed the idea.

What they didn't and still don't seem to realize is that many Navajos want no part of white culture. It's unacceptable because it values materialism, sensualism, and violence as a method of problem-solving. Western culture, to many Navajos' way of thinking, focuses on technological development at the expense of other, equally and more important ends. What I mean to say is that although much of it has improved life on this planet, our exclusive focus on technology has left us underdeveloped in all other areas. It's too narrow a focus.

It is interesting to ask what it was, exactly, that the early white educators wanted to erase in order to "civilize" Navajos. I'm just beginning to do research in this area, but what I know so far is that they wanted to eradicate Navajos' complex healing ceremonies--ceremonies like the kinaalda, which marks and celebrates a young girl's entrance into puberty. (Interestingly enough, these ceremonies have not been eradicated. Far from it.)

Westerners were trying to negate Navajo ways of knowing, like crystal-gazing and hand trembling. They were trying to

negate other ways of doing things--it is said, for example, that before white people came and the knowledge was lost, Navajos could travel from one place to another by means of prayer. They had, too, an advanced judicial system in which perpetrators of crimes, rather than being locked up or banished, were brought back into balance through ceremonies and by making restitution to the victim or victim's family.

White educators tried to eradicate a completely different way of viewing the world, one that, rather than being based on separation and difference, is circular and cyclic, one that sees things in terms of patterns in Nature. Navajo youths are taught by their relatives (often, a grandmother) that traditional Navajo culture is modeled on that of the Holy People. This model, when followed, produces balance and harmony for all of creation, and the medicine men say that all truths are taught in the oral narratives of the creation stories.

Instructors at NCC are taught the stories--or at least the first of 12 levels of understanding the stories. The first level seems like a fairy tale, myth, or religion to me, with Holy People and insect people, with Father Sky and Mother Earth, monsters and twins who slay the monsters. We're told that the stories represent a historical charter between the holy people and the Dine, and that relating course material to traditional creation stories will inspire and motivate <u>traditional</u> Navajo students. The medicine men tell us that these students learn differently--that if the creation stories are impressed strongly

on students' minds, they'll be able to intuitively create parallels to help them solve problems or issues that they encounter.

A common Anglo instructor's response to is this: "I don't teach religion." Insisting that it's not religion, Navajo educators say the Diné Education model reflects a different way of life, one that is simply more inclusive than the Western educational model. Westerners, because we're capitalists, focus primarily on preparing students to enter the work world, to get a decent job, to make a living, but the goals of Navajo education are more broad. They want an educational system that does more than prepare students for entrance into a Western capitalistic work place and one that does more than deepen students' understandings of Western culture. These are seen as valid goals, but as only two small parts of a sound education. Other valid goals include the teaching of Navajo history, culture, language and literacy. They include teaching students to strive for equality, balance, and to maintain high ethical standards. A Navajo education emphasizes values of sharing, cooperation, and kinship. Building students' self-confidence and inner strength is important. Before people can go out and build community, they must build their own centers. Then they can focus on livelihood, and only then on building community. Another focus of Navajo education is teaching students an awareness of self and their surroundings in order to detect sources of difficulties. Closely related is the attempt to teach students how to come up with

solutions to difficulties. Considered absolutely essential to a quality education is the application of knowledge--students must be taught where and how to apply what they learn. (That this does not happen in Western education is a major criticism of Western education.)

Clearly, Navajos raised to believe that this is the nature of a quality education will be disillusioned when they enter mainstream institutions which attempt to assimilate them, and negate or deny their own values and beliefs. I believe that this is a major reason for Native Americans' high dropout rate.

In spite of white opposition to the idea of an "Indian college," around the 1950s--during the time when BIA schoolteachers were training house servants and busboys--Navajo leaders became serious about their own institution of higher learning, and Navajo Community College, the first tribal college in the United States, was chartered in 1968. It differs from mainstream institutions in how it is organized, what is taught, and how it is taught. Rather than attempting to assimilate Navajo students into Western culture, NCC attempts to give students the knowledge they need to function effectively in both the white and the Navajo worlds. Rather than trying to erase Navajo culture and tradition, NCC attempts to promote and preserve it.

I'd like to finish by outlining the strategies adopted by many writing instructors at NCC:

--we use reading and writing topics relevant to students'

lives (political issues, like the Navajo/Hopi land dispute, the appropriation of Native American rituals and spirituality by whites, the religious freedom act, the use of peyote in the Native American Church; historical narratives; autobiography; and videos on Native American issues and life)

--we do less lecturing, and more collaborative and small group work; we try to build "learning communities"

--we're designing a developmental English textbook specifically for Navajo students, one that uses Navajo themes in its sample writings and exercises, and that addresses the kinds of errors bilingual Navajo students are likely to make (verb tenses, formation of plurals, and so on.)

--we are experimenting (successfully) with portfolios which include community projects like writing letters for illiterate community members, making videos, recording oral histories, and so on.

--we approach standard American English as one language, not superior to Navajo English, but as the one required for success in the white world

--we are looking for ways to acknowledge different rhetorical styles (Navajos' narratives tend <u>not</u> to be linear). We are most successful at doing this in the Navajo literacy classes.

In conclusion, I think that too many composition programs deal with cultural diversity by assuming that non-mainstream students bring a deficit of experience and knowledge, which the

program must remedy. (All-out assimilation.) The truth is that Native American students bring strengths, knowledge, and approaches to thinking and rhetoric that can benefit us all. And finally, I think we need to acknowledge that if the students fail, it's probably due to the narrowness of the teachers' and programs' visions.